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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

JCSM-982-64
23 November 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Subject: Courses of Action in Southeast Asia (U)

1. This memorandum responds to the memorandum of 17 November 1964 from the Assistant Secretary of State, Far Eastern Affairs, requesting review of the drafts on this subject prepared by the National Security Council (NSC) Working Group. Because of the preliminary and tentative nature of those drafts, this memorandum addresses only those matters which are considered to comprise the fundamentals of the present problem.

2. The Joint Chiefs of Staff consider Southeast Asia to be an area of major strategic importance to the United States, the loss of which would lead to grave political and military consequences in the entire Western Pacific, and to serious political consequences world-wide. These considerations are amplified in Appendix A. In the present situation the Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that there are three basic issues relative to our courses of action in Southeast Asia as follows:

- a. What are our objectives?
- b. What are the courses of action open to us?
- c. What are the probable consequences of these courses of action?

These issues are examined in the following paragraphs.

3. The Joint Chiefs of Staff understand established national policies include as objectives in Southeast Asia a stable and independent

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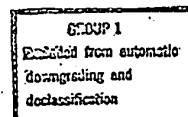
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Concommunist government in the Republic of South Vietnam (RVN),* and a stabilized situation in Laos which conforms to the Geneva Accords of 1962.** They consider these objectives to be valid and essential to maintaining the US security position world-wide. They further consider that the best probability of success in attaining these ends will be afforded by achieving the prerequisite objective of causing the cessation of North Vietnamese (DRV) support and direction of the insurgencies in RVN and Laos. Early implementation of political and military actions designed to achieve these objectives, in addition to continued aggressive programs in SVN, offers the greatest assurance of success.

4. The alternatives open to the United States in Southeast Asia are summarized in the five courses of action listed below, keyed as indicated to the courses of action set forth in the NSC Working Group (NSCWG) paper:

a. Course A' (This course of action is implicit in the content of the NSCWG paper but is not clearly identified as a separate and distinct option.): Terminate commitments in RVN and Laos, and withdraw under conditions which impair as little as possible our standing in the eyes of the world.

b. Course A (Corresponds to the NSCWG Course of Action A.): Continue actions within our present policies, including feasible improvements within the boundaries of those policies.

c. Course C (Corresponds to the NSCWG Course of Action C.): Undertake a program of graduated military and political initiatives to apply additional pressures against the DRV, without necessarily determining in advance to what degree we will commit ourselves to achieve our objectives, or at what point we might stop to negotiate, or what our negotiation objectives might be.

d. Course C' (This is a variant and logical extension of the NSCWG Course of Action C, although not specifically identified as such in the NSCWG paper.): Undertake a controlled program of graduated military pressures, systematically applied against the DRV, in coordination with appropriate political pressures. This course is distinguished from Course C by the advance decision to continue military pressures, if necessary, to the full limits of what military actions can contribute toward US national objectives. The military program for this course of action is the program set forth in JCSM-967-64, dated 18 November 1964.

* NSAM 288 of 17 March 1964

** NSAM 249 of 25 June 1963

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e. Course B (This Course of Action should be used in lieu of the NSCWG Course of Action B, which is not a valid formulation of any authoritative views known to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.): Undertake a controlled program of intense military pressures against the DRV, swiftly yet deliberately applied, designed to have major military and psychological impact from the outset, and accompanied by appropriate political pressures. The program would be undertaken on the basis that it would be carried through, if necessary, to the full limits of what military actions can contribute toward US national objectives; it would be designed, however, for suspension short of those limits if objectives were earlier achieved. The military program for this course of action is the program recommended in JCSM-955-64, dated 14 November 1964.

5. The probable consequences of the foregoing courses of action, with respect both to accomplishment of our objectives and to other potential reactions, are summarized below, with additional particulars set forth in Appendix B.

a. Course A': Abandons our objectives, sacrifices the military advantages attainable from a firm position on the mainland of Southeast Asia, and initiates progressive deterioration in our military position throughout the Western Pacific and in our political position world-wide.

b. Course A: Puts some added demands on the DRV, but not commensurate with those imposed by the DRV on RVN. Thus it offers no identifiable probability of accomplishing our objectives, nor of alleviating the critical situation in RVN. The present possibility of internal collapse in RVN could lead to accelerated take-over by the communists, and entails substantial risks to US personnel and equipment in country during the attendant disorders.

c. Course C: Is inconclusive as to accomplishment of over-all objectives, because it is undertaken without a clear determination to see things through in full. Its uncertain pace could permit and encourage enemy build-ups to counter our own. Thus it would raise the risks and costs to us of each separate military undertaking, would invite further escalations on the part of the enemy, and would make miscalculation regarding the resolve and determination of the United States more likely. At any specific level of intensity, this

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course of action appears likely to entail the highest military risks of those considered, and to foster progressively increasing adverse political pressures in many quarters.

d. Course C': Offers a probability of achieving our objectives through progressively reducing the DRV support to the insurgents. Its systematic force build-up would add further deterrence to possible CHICOM intervention, and should make miscalculation of US resolve less likely. Should escalation occur, it can be dealt with adequately and on terms more favorable than those applicable in Course C above. From a strictly military point of view this course of action involves probable higher military costs and casualties than Course B, for example, through failure to eliminate DRV air and DRV facilities available to CHICOM air at the outset. The determination signaled by this course should enlist substantial US public and world support, while giving pause to the opposition.

e. Course B: Offers the best probability of achieving our objectives at the least risk, casualties, and cost, and with the least probability of enemy miscalculation. In addition to its military advantages and its reduced probability of escalation, this course of action offers greater psychological impact and presents to all concerned a clear and unequivocal picture of US determination and US objectives. The possibility of intervention by the CHICOMs is judged to be less likely than in Course C'. There should be no problems beyond those in Courses C or C' in dealing with any world opinion which might oppose this course of action.

6. The Joint Chiefs of Staff reject Course A' because it abandons the objectives. They reject Course A because it does not offer a reasonable probability of achieving the objectives. They do not recommend Course C, because it is inconclusive as to attainment of our objectives, yet entails potentially high risks and costs.

7. Course C' is not recommended as the preferred course of action. However, should a controlled program of systematically increased pressures be directed, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend the program of actions contained in JCSM-967-64.

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8. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend that:

a. Course B, as defined in this paper and which offers the best probability of attaining the stated objectives, be implemented at this time.

b. The substance of this memorandum be reflected in appropriate revision of the NSC Working Group drafts of a study of US courses of action in Southeast Asia.

For the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

SIGNED
EARLE G. WHEELER
Chairman
Joint Chiefs of Staff

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APPENDIX A

A STRATEGIC EVALUATION

1. Introduction. A central problem now facing the United States in Southeast Asia (SEAsia)* is the consequences to the interests of the United States of the communist expansion in the Republic of South Vietnam (RVN) and Laos. The whole region is endangered, and US assistance must be provided if the countries concerned are to defend their freedoms successfully.

2. Strategic Importance of SEAsia

a. The immediate strategic importance of SEAsia lies in the political value that can accrue to the United States through a successful stand against the communist insurgencies in RVN and Laos. Also of vital importance is the psychological impact that a firm position by the United States will have on the countries of the world -- both free and communist.

b. RVN is a military keystone in SEAsia and is symbolic of US determination in Asia. The United States is committed in the eyes of the world to the defense of RVN as a matter of national prestige, credibility, and honor with respect to world-wide pledges and declaratory national policy.

c. SEAsia is strategically situated between Communist China and the Indian sub-continent and Australia. It is the southern anchor of the US and Free World defense posture in the Western Pacific.

d. SEAsia is of unique economic importance as a major source of rice for the food-deficient countries of Asia and

* In this appendix, the term "Southeast Asia" is used to include Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and South Vietnam.

is among the world's primary sources of natural rubber and tin. Control of the area, therefore, would not only be important to communist economic development, but would convey additional political leverage in dealing with countries which depend upon Southeast Asia's resources.

3. Advantages of US Success in RVN. US success in RVN will:

a. Demonstrate to the world US will and determination to fulfill its commitments.

b. Enhance US prestige and stature as the leader of the free world.

c. Restrict Communist China's territorial expansion and economic development.

d. Discredit "wars of national liberation."

e. Open a new era of confidence in SEAsia with the consequent increased possibilities for improving other potentially unstable situations in the area.

f. Diminish communist influence.

g. Terminate the personnel and materiel costs attendant to pursuing a long, drawn-out conflict.

h. Enable the United States to deploy from RVN major military assets now positioned there.

4. Consequences of US Withdrawal from RVN. A US withdrawal from RVN would:

a. Presage the collapse of the US position in SEAsia and the consequent weakening of the US defense posture in the Western Pacific.

b. Presage the early altering of the Free World orientation of the remaining countries of SEAsia, followed by uncertainties as to Nationalist China, Japan and Korea.

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- c. Increase the vulnerability of the Indian sub- 1
continent to communist penetration. 2
- d. Increase the strength and influence of Communist 3
China and decrease its vulnerability to US actions. 4
- e. Tend to isolate Australia and New Zealand. 5
- f. Portray US unwillingness or inability to deal with 6
"wars of national liberation" and consequently encourage 7
the communists to extend such "wars" into other areas. 8
- g. Weaken US prestige and influence throughout the 9
world. 10

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APPENDIX B

COURSES OF ACTION

1. The five courses of action presented in the basic memorandum are contained in the following annexes:
 - a. Course of Action A' - Annex A
 - b. Course of Action A - Annex B
 - c. Course of Action C - Annex C
 - d. Course of Action C' - Annex D
 - e. Course of Action B - Annex E

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ANNEX A TO APPENDIX B

COURSE OF ACTION A'

1. Course of Action. This course of action abandons the 1
stated objective and elects withdrawal from RVN as unobtrusively 2
and with as little loss of national dignity as possible. It 3
would be desirable to attempt forceful enough measures in the 4
situation so that our emergence, even in the worst case, 5
retained some standing as a leader against communist expansion. 6
It would be important to attempt somehow to make clear to the 7
world and to nations in Asia particularly, that withdrawal 8
from South Vietnam is due to certain local factors that do 9
not apply to other nations we are committed to defend. 10

2. Rationalization for withdrawal might be undertaken on 11
the basis that we had never thought we could defend a 12
government or a people that had ceased to care strongly 13
about defending themselves and could be predicated on some 14
"incident" which occurs or could be made to occur. The 15
reaction of the government and the people of RVN, when it 16
became clear that they were being abandoned, is not easily 17
predicted. Their feelings could erupt into violence against 18
US personnel. 19

3. Consequences. This course of action abandons the 20
national objectives the Joint Chiefs of Staff believe 21
essential. It also sacrifices the military advantages 22
attainable from a firm position on the mainland, and 23
initiates progressive deterioration in our military position 24
throughout the Western Pacific and in our world-wide polit- 25
ical position. 26

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ANNEX B TO APPENDIX B

COURSE OF ACTION A

1. Course of Action

a. This course comprises continuation of actions within present policies. In general it constitutes a more refined and extended implementation of the present counterinsurgency effort within RVN.

b. An option included in this course would be appropriate reprisal actions for Viet Cong incidents such as the mortar attack on Bien Hoa.

2. Consequences

Course of Action A would be unlikely to achieve the objective or to alleviate the critical situation in RVN. The present possibility of internal collapse in RVN could lead to accelerated take-over by the communists, and entails substantial risks to US personnel and equipment in country during the attendant disorders. This course allows the DRV to retain the initiative and thus control the nature and extent of the escalation. The US and RVN would continue to react to DRV initiatives. It is clearly to DRV advantage not to escalate so long as they are winning; therefore, while the possibility of escalation exists, it is unlikely.

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ANNEX C TO APPENDIX B

COURSE OF ACTION C

1. Course of Action.

a. This is a course of graduated military and political initiatives without specific determination of the degree to which we will commit ourselves to achieve US objectives.

b. This course consists of a progressive but indeterminate application of increasing military pressures, undertaken in concert with appropriate political pressures, the objective of which is to cause the DRV to terminate its support of the insurgencies in RVN and Laos. Closely controlled, it permits interruption at some appropriate point or points for negotiations and provides for the contingency that as developments are analyzed, it may be thought expedient to settle for less than complete achievement of our objectives for RVN and Laos.

c. It does not permit a clear set of agreed military objectives, nor offer a reasonable chance of fulfilling favorable negotiating objectives.

2. Military Actions. These actions would be similar to those set forth in Course of Action C'; however, the pace would be slower.

3. Consequences. This course is inconclusive as to our over-all objectives. Its uncertain pace would become progressively more apparent, eroding morale of our allies, bolstering that of the enemy, and fostering adverse political pressures in many quarters of the world. It could permit and encourage enemy buildup to counter our own, thus raising the risks and costs to us of each separate military action and inviting further escalations on the part of the enemy. Although it is judged that the latter could be dealt with adequately if occurring, the costs would be greater than under more rapidly executed military pressures.

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ANNEX D TO APPENDIX B

COURSE OF ACTION C

1. Course of Action. This course of action is a controlled program of graduated military pressures systematically applied against the DRV, in coordination with appropriate political pressures, undertaken on the basis of a clear and agreed set of military objectives, and on the basis that we determine in advance to continue the military program, if necessary, to the full limits, of what military actions can contribute toward US national objectives. Should such a course of action be directed, an appropriate program of military actions and objectives is recommended in JCSM-967-64. Essential elements are set forth below.

2. Objectives

a. Signal the willingness and determination of the United States to use increasing force in support of national objectives with respect to RVN and Laos, namely an independent and stable non-communist government in RVN, and a free and neutral Laos under the terms of the Geneva Accords of 1962.

b. Reduce progressively by military operations the DRV support of the insurgencies in RVN and Laos to the extent necessary to tip the balance in favor of the governments of RVN and Laos.

c. Punish the DRV for DRV-supported military actions by the Viet Cong/Pathet Lao (VC/PL) against the governments of RVN and Laos, including the US casualties which have resulted from those actions.

d. Terminate the conflicts in Laos and RVN only under conditions which would result in the achievement of US objectives.

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3. Military Actions

- a. Military actions are divided into three categories: 1
Sequential, Reprisal and Collateral. 2
- b. Sequential Graduated Actions 3
- (1) Resume DeSoto Patrols. 4
- (2) Intensify 34A Operations with emphasis on 5
MAROPS and initiate air operations against selected 6
targets. 7
- (3) Expand air and initiate (within existing 8
capabilities) ground cross-border operations to interdict 9
the flow of communist personnel and material through 10
the Laos Panhandle area. 11
- (4) At the discretion of Saigon authorities, permit 12
RVN forces to pursue and destroy VC forces which cross 13
into Cambodia. 14
- (5) Conduct US armed reconnaissance and interdiction 15
on Routes 6, 7, 8, 12 and 23 in Laos and conduct air 16
strikes on PL/VM forces and facilities throughout Laos. 17
- (6) Conduct low-level reconnaissance probes of 18
infiltration-associated targets near the Laos border 19
in the DRV and attack LOC in DRV near the Laos border 20
and the DMZ. 21
- (7) Expand the reconnaissance coverage of the DRV and 22
Cambodia and conduct air strikes against infiltration- 23
associated targets in the DRV (Phase I - 13 targets 24
south of the 19th parallel, followed by Phase II - 14 25
targets north of the 19th parallel). 26
- (8) Conduct aerial mining of DRV ports, initiate 27
a naval quarantine/blockade of the DRV, and attack, with 28
increasing severity, targets in the DRV. 29
- (9) Be prepared to extend maritime operations as 30
necessary in order to blockade effectively Cambodia. 31

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(10) Conduct air strikes against remaining military 1
and industrial targets in the DRV. Targets are as 2
contained in "94 Target" list. 3

(11) Conduct amphibious/airborne operations to 4
establish lodgement on one or more coastal areas in 5
the littoral of the DRV. The lodgement(s) to be of 6
sufficient magnitude to pose a plausible threat to 7
the DRV. (Adoption of this action is pending JCS 8
decision.) 9

c. Reprisal Actions. Take appropriate reprisal actions 10
in the event of DRV/VC serious provocations. Course of 11
Action B constitutes the preferred reprisal action. 12

d. Collateral Actions 13

(1) Maintain current levels of forward deployments 14
of US combat units in Southeast Asia. 15

(2) Prior to initiating US air strikes against 16
North Vietnam (sequential action (7) above), deploy, 17
as necessary, US forces for security and deterrent 18
purposes in accordance with appropriate CINCPAC 19
OPLANS (changes to force list to be provided by CINCPAC) 20
and evacuate dependents from the RVN and Laos. 21

(3) Reintroduce a MAAG type Supply and Training 22
Mission (SATM) into Laos. 23

(4) Deploy additional US (and Thai or other Allied) 24
forces as necessary to: 25

(a) Conduct required operations. 26

(b) Deter further communist escalations. 27

(c) Defend key Mekong points. 28

(d) Logistically support operations. 29

4. Remarks. Determination to carry the program through in 30
the pursuit of our agreed objectives (of which paragraph 2 d 31
is paramount), is the key difference of this course as compared 32
to Course of Action C 33

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5. Consequences. This course offers a probability of 1
achieving our objectives. The determination which it 2
evidences should enlist substantial US public support and 3
stiffen our allies, while giving pause to the enemy. World 4
opinion might include opposition from the usual quarters, but
this would be subdued by this same show of determination and 6
strength. The planned military actions would progressively 7
reduce the DRV support to the insurgencies. Its systematic 8
force build-up, coupled with reduction of DRV capabilities, 9
would add further deterrence to possible CHICOM intervention, 10
which is judged less likely than in Course of Action C, and 11
more likely than Course of Action B at any comparable level 12
of intensity. Should such escalation occur, it can be dealt 13
with adequately and on terms more favorable than those 14
applicable in Course of Action C. 15

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COURSE OF ACTION B

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b. Prior to air attacks on the DRV, land the Marine
Special Landing Force at Da Nang and airlift Army or
Marine units from Okinawa to the Saigon/Tan Son Nhut/
Bien Hoa area, to provide increased security for US
personnel and installations.

c. Use aircraft engaged in airlift (subparagraph b,
above) to assist in evacuation of US dependents from
Saigon, to commence concurrently with the daylight air
strikes against the DRV (subparagraph d, below).

d. Assemble and prepare necessary forces so that:

(1) Within 60 to 72 hours, 30 B-52s from Guam
conduct night strike on DRV target #6 (Phuc Yen
Airfield).

(2) Commencing at first light on the day following
(1) above, PACOM air and naval forces conduct air
strikes against DRV targets #6 (Phuc Yen Airfield)
(daylight follow-up on the above night strike), #3
(Hanoi Gia Lam Airfield), #8 (Haiphong Cat Bi Air-
field), #48 (Haiphong POL), and #49 (Hanoi POL).

(3) Concurrently with subparagraph (2) above, the
VNAF will strike DRV target #36 (Vit Thu Lu Barracks).

(4) Combat Air Patrols (CAP), flak suppressive
fire, strike photographic reconnaissance, and Search
and Rescue (SAR) operations are conducted as
appropriate.

(5) The above actions are followed by:

(a) Armed reconnaissance on infiltration routes
in Laos.

(b) Air strikes against infiltration routes
and targets in DRV.

(c) Progressive PACOM and SAC strikes against
the targets listed in the 94 Target Study.

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3. Consequences. This course of action is considered to 1
offer the greatest likelihood of achieving US objectives. 2
In contrast to an offensive course of action which starts at 3
a lower point in the spectrum (Courses of Action A, C, and 4
C'), a sharp blow, because of the boldness and resoluteness 5
of its delivery, will discourage rather than encourage the 6
enemy to escalate. For this reason, it is more likely that 7
the objective can be achieved at the lowest possible costs 8
and in the shortest space of time, and losses would be held 9
to a minimum. Pressures of world opinion against the US 10
would have little time to build up. 11

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